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ABSTRACT

Exceptional Mexican American students face difficulties not experienced by their Anglo counterparts because the educational system is not set up to deal with members of ethnic and cultural minorities. Spanish-speaking students face the problem of gaining competence in their first language while learning English as a second language. Standard psychometric tests discriminate against cultural minorities. In particular, Mexican American students are apt to be misplaced in classes for the mentally handicapped or not identified if they are gifted. There is a shortage of certified bilingual teachers and of appropriate bilingual instructional materials. The Bilingual Education Act of 1968 encouraged bilingual-bicultural education and paved the way for programs that have improved education for Mexican Americans. Research is being done to develop culturally valid tests for identifying gifted as well as handicapped minority students. Pluralistic evaluation, which combines psychometric assessment and adaptive behavior tests, is resolving the problem of misplacement of Mexican American students in special education classes for the mentally handicapped. (JHZ)

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MEXICAN AMERICAN EDUCATION

FACT SHEET

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Mexican American Special Education

by

Suzanne M. Tucker

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MEXICAN AMERICAN EDUCATION

FACT SHEET

MEXICAN AMERICAN SPECIAL EDUCATION

ARE ADEQUATE PROGRAMS AVAILABLE TO THE MEXICAN AMERICAN IN NEED OF SPECIAL EDUCATION?

No. Unfortunately, the unique educational needs of the exceptional Mexican American student have often been ignored or ineffectively dealt with. For example, (in the past) many Mexican American students have been placed in special education classes designed primarily for the white, English-speaking individual. This situation has recently gained the attention of educators, resulting in improved programs for most minorities.

WHAT PROBLEMS EXIST WITH MEXICAN AMERICAN SPECIAL EDUCATION?

Exceptional Mexican American students face difficulties not encountered by their Anglo counterparts. These difficulties basically arise because the educational system in this country is generally not set up to deal with members of ethnic and cultural minorities.

OVERCOMING THE LANGUAGE BARRIER is perhaps the hardest problem for Spanish-speaking student to deal with. The problem of gaining competence in their first language and learning a second language is especially difficult for preschool children with conditions which handicap learning (4). Adequate oral language must be developed before actual reading skills can be developed (8). This process is time-consuming, and unless special bilingual measures are taken, the Mexican American child may fall behind his Anglo peers academically. The child who is pulled out of regular classes for special lessons misses classwork, and sill be forced to spend a great deal of time and energy just to keep up with his classmates.

IDENTIFYING THE EXCEPTIONAL MEXICAN AMERICAN CHILD in the early years of his education is essential. However, standard psychometric tests are often not valid cross-culturally, and many teachers aren't trained in the use of newer, more culturally-appropriate tests. In particular, existing intelligence tests are ineffective in identifying the gifted minority student. Precious time may be lost before the exceptional minority child in need of special education is even properly identified and evaluated.

LIMITED AVAILABILITY OF INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS AND TEACHERS suitable for work with exceptional Mexican American children often presents a problem. Attempts at literal translation of English materials into Spanish may yield inaccurate, misleading products. Programs designed specifically for the Spanish-speaking student and taught by a certified bilingual teacher are preferable, but not always possible (5). This is especially true in isolated areas, or in parts of the country where the number of Mexican Americans are low. Inadequate temporary solutions such as the hiring of sub-professionals or parents are often implemented.

MISCLASSIFICATION OF RACIAL MINORITIES IN SPECIAL EDUCATION CLASSES for the mentally retared has recently caused much concern, especilly in California (9). This misclassification often results from the use of invalid testing procedures to identify learning handicapped children. Also, special education classes have evolved in some areas as a form of legal exemption from normal school status for particular types of culturally different yet mentally able minority children (10).

ARE SOLUTIONS TO THESE PROBLEMS BEING FOUND?

Fortunately, awareness of the problems faced by the exceptional Mexican American student has increased over the past ten years. This awareness has resulted in the improvement of special education programs for Mexican Americans. A few of these improvements are described below.:

THE BILINGUAL EDUCATION ACT SIGNED INTO LAW JANUARY 1968 encourages the teaching of Spanish in schools and provides that children aren't forbidden to speak it in school (7). This encouragement of bilingual-bicultural education paved the way for the formulation of the Bilingual Early Childhood Program and the Bilingual Kindergarten Program. These two programs ensure that the Spanish-speaking child does not fall behind his Anglo classmates while learning English as a second language. Also, bilingual education develops a sense of pride in their heritage for Mexican American children, and encourages rather than discourages the cultivation of the students' already existing knowledge of Spanish.

OUTREACH ACTIVITIES such as the Responsive Environment Program for Spanish American Children and the related Responsive Environment Early Education Program are providing direct services to exceptional Mexican American children in isolated areas of New Mexico through the use of a specially designed and equipped motor coach. RESPAC and REEEP air: to prevent school failure with an intervention program which includes early identification and remediation of developmental learning deficiencies; to integrate learning handicapped children into the regular school program and; to provide in service training for teachers and aides in dealing with exceptional Mexican American children (1,2).

NEW PSYCHOMETRIC TESTS VALID FOR USE WITH MEXICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS have been developed in recent years.The major goal of many of these devices is to enable the untrained individual to identify children who need more evaluation or diagnosis. The Observational Checklist for Referral is an example of such a test (4). Furthermore, work done in resolving the problem of misplacement of Mexican American students in special education classes for the mentally retared has resulted in the development of the Adaptive Behavior Inventory for Children.The ABIC reflects a child's competence in functioning independently and meeting the social demands of his or her environment.Results indicate that the pluralistic approach (a combination of psychometric assesment and adaptive behavior tests) results in the smallest number of students being labeled as mentally retared (6). Also, research is being done in developing culturally valid tests for identifying gifted as well as handicapped minority students (3).

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